

Article

Integrating Spirituality into Athlete Care: Enhancing Holistic Well-being through Theological Approaches

Hansson G. Labisig 

The Pontifical and Royal University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines

Correspondence: hanssonglabisig@gmail.com

Abstract

While athlete care has historically paid great attention to physical health, performance enhancement, and psychological resilience, little attention is given to the spiritual dimension, considering that this is also a critical component of overall human well-being. In this study, I make a case for incorporating spirituality into the care of athletes from a theological perspective that seeks to cultivate mental, emotional, and physical resilience. I aim to investigate whether faith-based practices help sustain athletes and mitigate moral dilemmas. Furthermore, by citing historical and recent examples, I will also illustrate how faith-based mindfulness practices, spiritual mentorship, and community can help enhance a player's mental health, ultimately leading to improved performance. Tools such as centering prayer, lectio divina, and spiritual journal practices are examined through a theological framework to explore their impact on optimal attentional focus, emotional regulation, and coping in the student-athlete. Moreover, this study also suggests a structured spiritual module range for student-athletes, encompassing regularity and disciplinary areas related to typical exercise, along with peer support and exercises that promote ethical decision-making, thereby creating an environment conducive to personal/professional growth. This interdisciplinary paper proposes an integrative model for athlete care that merges theological reflections and sports science to provide coaches, psychologists, and pastoral caregivers with salient guidelines.

Keywords: sports, spirituality, athletes' holistic well-being, mental resilience

Suggested citation:

Labisig, H. (2025). Integrating Spirituality into Athlete Care: Enhancing Holistic Well-being through Theological Approaches. *Philippine Association for the Sociology of Religion Journal*, 5(2), 114-130. <https://doi.org/10.63931/gbq9f377>

Publisher's Note: IJCHR stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Introduction

We have long recognized that athletic greatness relies not only on physicality itself, but also on a complex interplay of fitness levels, technical ability, and psychological tenacity. However, one aspect of athlete care that has received little consideration in contemporary approaches to the welfare of athletes, whether psychological or emotional support, is the field of spirituality (Bremault-Philips et al., 2015). In recent years, there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of integrating spirituality into athlete care. This dimension offers unique benefits that extend beyond performance optimization, contributing to mental, emotional, and social well-being. When spirituality is involved in the realm of athletics, rather than religious rites or faith-based practices, this refers to one's wider connection with purpose and meaning that transcends everyday life. This is why many of us encounter challenges common to athletes: pressures associated with performance, injury, and personal life become too overwhelming. The experience of these challenges fosters a need for psychological resilience, but this is something that one cannot simply comprehend through the lenses of physical or cognitive perspective. Athletes who participate in spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer, or community support, have been found to exhibit better stress tolerance and higher motivation to recover from sports-related difficulties (Doorley et al., 2022). Spirituality enhances an athlete's emotional resilience by cultivating a sense of purpose that extends beyond the pursuit of victory.

It is for these reasons that this study examines how spirituality could be integrated in athlete care to provide a holistic approach for the spiritual (in addition to emotional and physical) recovery of athletes. The researchers also hope to develop a spiritual care module that addresses the unique needs of student-athletes, providing guidance on how they can incorporate religious practices into their lives and foster communities rooted in faith. It also explores the potential benefits of spiritual mentorship and community support as important components in decision-making within a congruent ethical framework for optimal health across multiple domains in athletes, including a discussion addressing concerns related to religious diversity among those involved in sports. The research aims to provide coaches, sports psychologists, and pastoral caregivers with interdisciplinary principles to facilitate holistic support for athletes in their personal and academic development.

The study employs the See-Judge-Act methodology, which facilitates reflection, ethical analysis, and the development of actionable solutions in athletic care.

Theological Foundations of Spiritual Care

Theological anthropology provides a foundation for integrating spiritual care into an athlete's well-being. It sees human beings (i.e., athletes) as constituted not only by body and mind but, most importantly, by spirit. The interconnectedness of all that Christian theology affirms means that any real human uplift will be predicated upon the development of the whole person (physical, mental, and spiritual). St. Thomas of

Aquinas stressed the body-soul relation and insisted that spiritual virtues, faith, hope, and love (theological) are paramount in directing human action to the final end or final good (Austin, 2017). These virtues not only serve as one of the end forms by which individuals can achieve a virtuous life, but they can also enhance their capacity to endure difficulties or challenges, a characteristic that is especially applicable to athletic performance.

Faith, Hope, and Love in Athletic Contexts

As discussed extensively by Jernej Pisk in *Faith, Hope and Love in Sports*, the theological virtues (Faith, Hope, and Love) are pivotal if one ventures into the understanding of the spiritual dimension in Sports. Here, we can observe how the virtue of faith is reflected in the relationship between coaches and athletes, particularly in the context of trust, both during training and in sports competitions (Pisk, 2017). Like the apostles who were inspired by God's faith to believe in their own capacity to succeed, faith in athletes operates in a similar way. It propels the athlete to believe in their capacity, enabling them to achieve their life or career goals. As for the theological virtue of "not yet," the Virtue of Hope can be observed in the daily routine of an athlete. It drives the athlete to overcome adversities and challenges in training and competitions. The virtue of Hope here extends beyond mere optimism or positive thinking (though both have their place), incorporating elements such as trust, patience, and reliance on God's grace. The virtue of hope is not merely a psychological coping mechanism. It is an essential tool in the sports domain and also serves as a spiritual touchstone that locates athletes in a larger story about why we are here and what truly matters (i.e., the meaning and purpose of things). Likewise, St. Thomas Aquinas described hope as the "expectation of some good," whereby he made a distinction between something that is both difficult and can be achieved even in the midst of suffering or hardship. Applying this theological view on hope, we can see how it can help student-athletes in their everyday struggles and challenges as individuals and/or as teammates who have goals. To bind these two virtues, the virtue of love for Jernej Pisk, is manifested in teamwork, camaraderie, acts of sportsmanship, and compassion. In this context, we can argue that athletes who practice the virtue of love create an environment where they prioritize the well-being of their teammates and opponents, ultimately fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect and collaboration. In this kind of environment, athletes celebrate success together, endure hardships, and show grace in defeat, reflecting the relational aspect of love as a binding force in the sporting world (Pisk, 2017).

These virtues are a framework for an athlete's spiritual care. Trust and perseverance that come from faith, motivation to pursue future goals thanks to hope, and support from empathetic characters for emotional well-being are all brought by love. Chaplains and coaches, as those who provide spiritual care, are able to promote these virtues, which foster inner strength and moral resilience among athletes within the cultural context of hyper-masculinity through their spiritual guidance.

Endurance Grounded in Faith in the Athletic Journey

Endurance is another key element of athletic performance that can enrich the Christian understanding of perseverance, suffering, and moral growth. In theological terms, however, endurance is more than mere dogged persistence: it constitutes a category not so much for doing things under duress as itself an obvious discipline that both shapes character and also points to a life consistent with a preferable moral order. In games, athletes are trained not only to be in great physical condition but also to learn how to embody virtues such as humility, patience, and endurance, which are essential for sports. St. Thomas of Aquinas, in his *Summa*, locates perseverance within the context of remaining "firm" (ST II-II 137.1 ad 4), i.e., persevering at being of one mind with oneself over time and under stress to do otherwise without God's help. This means athletes grounded in their faith can utilize the strength of that higher purpose to endure hardships while staying true and focused on what they set out to achieve. With spiritual endurance, these individuals will view a challenge as an opportunity to develop more capacities within themselves towards transcendence and growth, which can quickly (and potentially instantly) transform those moments into experiences that foster learning.

In addition, the empirical studies of Idler (2008) and Joshi & Kumari (2011) suggest that there is evidence to support the notion that spiritual resilience contributes more to mentally strong health outcomes among athletes. These investigations revealed that religious views or spirituality were associated with more effective emotional management and better subsequent rebounding from performances. This supports several studies (Bonelli & Koenig, 2013; Koenig, 2009, 2012; Moreira-Almeida, Lotufo Neto, & Koenig, 2006) that indicate religion and spirituality have a positive impact on a better quality of life compared to those who are less religious or spiritual (Noh et al., 2020).

Spirituality in Historical and Contemporary Sporting Practices

Historically, sports and spirituality have intersected in numerous ways, extending beyond mere performance enhancement. From Greek athletes dedicating their victories to the gods, to Christian athletes seeing what they do on a playing field as an extension of their 'gifts' to be otherwise in a group faith through sports. However, this relationship has changed, increasingly in recent years, as spirituality is seen more and more not so much as being about rituals or practices but as ways or tools for the mental and physical well-being of an individual. In the book "Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports" by Shirl Hoffman, he argues that athletes with a Christian background often believe and strive to redeem sports. This belief, he argued, is rooted in the tendency of sports to prioritize faith in winning and profit over spiritual growth (Hoffman, 2020). Spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer, and mindfulness, have become increasingly valued in today's mainstream sports culture as effective tools for enhancing mental well-being. However, their spiritual meaning

should not be overlooked. Mindfulness rooted in faith-based practices, for example, helps athletes remember they are on a divine mission when faced with distraction or heightened stakes.

In general, the theological foundations of spirituality in athletic care provide a rich and nuanced perspective on how virtues such as hope and fortitude can significantly enhance an athlete's overall well-being. By integrating spirituality into existing athletic care programs, coaches, sports psychologists, and others concerned with the athlete's care can foster a holistic approach that leads to more resilient and purpose-driven athletes.

Spirituality as a Critical Component of Holistic Well-Being

Central to incorporating spirituality into athlete care is the idea of holistic well-being. Athlete care traditionally conceives of athletes as ranging from purely physical to psychological, yet these approaches often diminish an athlete's resilience and emotional stability without acknowledging spiritual fitness, which provides a sense of purpose. Spirituality deals with the big questions that athletes don't usually consider, except perhaps in moments of adversity (injury, loss, or career uncertainty). By integrating spiritual practices and support systems, athletes can become more grounded and whole-minded in their well-being. This part of the course explores how spiritual fitness promotes holistic well-being and teaches students about its role in being a sustainable, adaptable, and purposeful athlete.

Understanding Holistic Well-Being in Athlete Care

Athlete care encompasses not only physical health, but also emotional and spiritual elements, supporting the whole being emotionally and psychologically, which is essential for total resilience and optimal performance. In the past, caring for an athlete has been more focused on physical and mental toughness than spiritual well-being, even though spirituality is a driving force behind personal development. Research indicates that athletes who combine sports and religious practices tend to be happier individuals overall. Tejero-González (2020), for example, presents data showing that those who combine sport with religion are happier than the rest of the study's participants (Tejero-González, 2020). This highlights the potential need for the implementation of spirituality-specific approaches to enhance mental/emotional health among athletes.

Key Spiritual Practices for Athletes

Simply adding spiritual rituals, such as prayer, meditation, and scripture study, into the routines of athletes can have a tremendous effect on how well an athlete is able to focus on tense moments, moderate their emotions during competition pressures, or create some space for mental clarity when outside life distractions inevitably also press upon performance. Traditional Christian practices, such as *lectio divina* and centering prayer, can be utilized to help athletes manage anxiety in the

moment. This can also be seen in Koenig's (2009) study, which indicated that an athlete's coping mechanism improved when religious practices were employed after a poor performance, leading to a more positive outlook and a more hopeful disposition (Koenig, 2009). These practices promote mental clarity, which is crucial for achieving peak performance, particularly under stress.

In addition, the ethical and moral challenges athletes face while competing are also one area where spiritual practices can be beneficial. A study by Nesti (2019) emphasized the importance of spiritual resilience in highly stressful environments. The study focused on professional football players and noted that spiritual values such as hope, love, and sacrifice play a crucial role in shaping an athlete's decisions, especially under pressure (Nesti, 2019). In this way, Athletes can incorporate spiritual practices in their routines that will develop a sense of purpose beyond competition, aligning their actions with their faith and values.

Impact of Spirituality on Mental Health and Emotional Health

Spirituality has a profound impact on the mental and emotional well-being of athletes. It cannot only support stress and anxiety management but also emotional balance and resilience. Research by Röthlin et al. (2023) emphasizes the importance of addressing both the psychological and spiritual aspects of an athlete's life to promote overall mental well-being (Röthlin et al., 2023). By providing athletes with a sense of purpose, hope, and emotional stability, spirituality serves as a buffer against the possibility of mental health issues such as burnout, depression, and anxiety. Röthlin et al. (2023) believe that athletes who engage in spiritual practices have a better chance of coping with setbacks and recovering from emotional challenges (Röthlin et al., 2023). Moreover, the notion of hope derived from spirituality plays a vital role in enhancing psychological resilience. Hope was a psychological strength in itself that helped athletes (Murphy, 2023) develop coping abilities during tough times, such as injuries or failure. Spiritual practices can help athletes develop optimism and emotional regulation, which are necessary for their athletic success within the parameters of mental health.

A Theologically Informed Model of Athlete Care

Spiritual Formation in Athletic Programs

A model for athlete care informed by theology includes a framework in which spiritual disciplines are integrated into the actual training programs. Spiritual formation in this context involves specific activities that aim to develop the inner life of young people, giving them a sense of purpose that extends beyond athletic achievement. This approach utilizes spiritual disciplines, including prayer, meditation, prayer journaling, and theological reflection, as key manifestations toward wholeness. In an article by McKnight (2009) in the field of sports medicine, he highlights the importance of spiritual practices and suggests that they can not only enhance physical health but also emotional and mental well-being. Athletes who

regularly engage in spiritual practices report improved emotional responses, increased focus, and an effective coping mechanism for stress. Similarly, the article discusses how meditation and visualization practices can help decrease anxiety, enabling athletes to perform at their best on game day and ultimately lead to a happier life (McKnight, 2009). For McKnight, these practices foster a sense of connectedness and purpose that enable athletes to align their physical goals with their spiritual and emotional well-being.

Additionally, Nesti (2011) argues that spiritual identity is a core constituent of being for professional football players in an elite environment such as the English Premier League. The work of Nesti attacks the issue head-on when he claims that spiritual care cannot be part of any athlete development system and sports psychology until it recognizes, as an article in this journal argued, that athletes perceive themselves to a very great extent by reference not only through their sporting ability, but also via faith (Nesti, 2011). For Nesti, faith has the effect of further motivating and reminding them that their sport is more than just a job; it is also a spiritual journey. Spiritual formation through athletic programs can be observed in various ways, including daily reflection, group guided prayer sessions, and adherence to traditional Christian practices such as *lectio divina*. As Koenig (2009) explains, such practices are linked to mental toughness; the more an athlete engages in meditation or mindfulness, the better equipped they will be mentally due to the greater clarity and focus that are available when dealing with competition stress. (Koenig, 2009) This provides athletes with a well-rounded program that fosters not only their professional ambitions but also allows them to grow as individuals. Faith-based support networks also provide athletes with a faith-influenced moral compass for making decisions on and off the field. Stevenson (1991) writes that spiritual mentors may support sportsmen in dilemmas over matters such as doping, cheating, or unsporting behavior by promoting consideration of principles from their tradition, e.g., integrity, humility, and service (Stevenson, 1991). Not only does this help keep athletes on the straight and narrow, but it also fosters a culture of trust and accountability throughout the team.

Proposed Module Tailored for Student-Athletes

This paper introduces a spiritual module designed to cultivate holistic well-being among student-athletes by incorporating spiritual, mental, and physical activities into their daily routines. That's where the module comes in, addressing specific obstacles that collegiate athletes face, ranging from performance anxiety and professional decision-making to emotional wellness, while also promoting individual prosperity through faith-based methods. Its aim is to provide a framework in which spiritual exercises rooted in Christian virtues, such as hope, resilience, and perseverance, are part of the athlete development process.

Module Structure and Content

There are six sessions in this spiritual module, each emphasizing certain parts of spiritual, mental, and physical growth. To be engaged over a six-week period, it is suitable that each session builds on the next to help student-athletes establish and maintain spiritual rootedness in their sport.

Session 1: Spiritual Self-Awareness and Identity Formation

This session is designed to help athletes rediscover their spiritual identity beyond their performances. Athletes will be guided through timed exercises that incorporate theological reflection, journaling, and scriptural study, focusing on themes of hope, purpose, and resilience. This aims to give athletes a deeper sense of self through their spiritual beliefs as they compete in some tough sports.

Suggested Activities

1. Guided Journaling- Athletes will engage in journaling with the following questions:

Who am I beyond my athletic Identity?

What role does my faith play in my personal and athletic life?

2. Scriptural Reading and Reflection- The Athletes will read and reflect on the following biblical passages that emphasize hope, purpose, and resilience

Philippians 4:3: “ I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Reflection Focus: This verse makes it clear that strength only comes from God. And the athletes will have a chance to reflect on not only their physical and mental acumen, but also on who they believe. Athletes may be able to relate that their athletic identity can coexist with a Christian identity that empowers them through it all.

1 Corinthians 9:24 (NIV): “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.”

Reflection Focus: This passage makes a comparison between the discipline required in athletic training and that of spiritual discipline needed for the Corinthian life. Athletes can now recognize that their physical training is also a reflection of their spiritual journey. It acts as a reminder of the temporary nature of earthly victories and that their spiritual evictions create eternal presence. Athletes can consider how their spiritual identity should influence their approach to sports and life.

Isaiah 40:31 (NIV): “but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

Reflection Focus: This verse focuses on themes of hope and renewal. It may just help their bodies remember what God has been telling them, providing a new strength

for when they feel weak in body or mind. The passage is a call for athletes to believe in God's timing and power, teaching that their identity & fortitude flow from Him.

Session 2: Faith-Based Mindfulness for Performance and Stress Management

This session returns to faith-based practices rooted in mindfulness, including contemplative prayer and Christian meditation techniques. The strategies aim to improve cognitive functioning and emotional responses when mentally aroused during performance contexts (i.e., competition). Koenig (2009) also added that Spiritual Practices had the ability to reduce levels of depression and anxiety, which would allow us to work at a higher level than when we are stuck in our heads with worry (Koenig, 200). They will be instructed in breath prayers and centering prayer that apply to their pre-game routines for managing stress, keeping them focused.

Suggested Activities

1. **Breath Prayer Exercise:** Athletes are invited to practice breath prayers, while repeating short and meaningful phrases (e.g. Lord grant me Peace) in rhythm with breathing. This helps them calm their minds and focus before a competition. This will help calm their minds and focus before the competition.
2. **Christian Meditation:** Athletes will be guided through a 5-10-minute session of centering prayer, where they will focus on a single word or phrase, such as "peace," "trust," or "hope," while meditating. This exercise will help enhance their mental clarity and inner peace.

Session 3: Spiritual Resilience and Coping with Failure

Session three covers how to cultivate spiritual resiliency in the face of adversity, such as injury or failure. With theological reflections on Hope and Perseverance, athletes will be invited to establish the values of their journeys from this foundation. Hope is more specifically linked to positive coping strategies during times of adversity (Murphy, 2023), as it helps athletes maintain a sense that the proverbial glass may be half full rather than seeing their battles under oppressive circumstances. Resource speakers could also be invited who can share their faith stories of overcoming various adversities in their careers or personal lives.

Suggested Activities

1. **Case Studies of Faith-Driven Athletes/Resource Speakers:** Athletes will be presented and will examine real-life faith-driven athletes who have faced significant setbacks (e.g, injury or loss) but relied on their faith for resilience. This provides context for discussion on how hope can inspire perseverance.
2. **Theological reflection on setbacks:** Athletes will be given a structured reflection exercise where they focus on a challenge and apply theological concepts like hope and perseverance. For example, they may write about how Romans 4:3-5

(which discusses how suffering produces perseverance) relates to their experiences.

3. **Hope Building Activity:** Athletes will identify three setbacks in their careers and develop faith-based affirmations for each one, focusing on how hope can help them overcome these challenges. This theological exercise helps foster emotional resilience and a forward-looking mindset.

Session 4: Building Community and Accountability through faith.

This session helps athletes understand how the community of peers plays a big role in the spiritual and training lives. Using the theological concept of the Body of Christ, athletes will be encouraged to form their own small spiritual peer groups for regular conversation and mutual accountability. Athletes require spiritual mentoring and peer support for personal and professional growth. Interactive activities can be introduced in their part that focus on building trust and mutual support, which will enhance teamwork and cohesion within athletic teams.

Suggested Activities

1. **Small Group Faith Sharing:** Here, athletes will be divided into small groups (depending on how many participants) to share their spiritual experiences and challenges. These groups will serve as faith-based accountability partners supporting one another in their spiritual growth and athletic development
2. **Team Building Through Spiritual Exercises:** Teams will participate in trust-building exercises that incorporate faith, such as partner prayers, where athletes pray for each other's specific needs, or group prayer focusing on the team's goals and shared values.
3. **Scripture and Team Dynamics Discussions:** Possibly with a retreat master, athletes will read and reflect on scriptures about unity and teamwork, such as 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, which discusses the body of Christ. The retreat master will discuss how these concepts apply to their roles within the team and how they can foster the spirit of collaboration and mutual support.

Session 5: Ethical Decision-Making in Sports

The session is about the ethical quandaries around doping, cheating, and unsportsmanlike behavior that athletes might encounter. Athletes will discuss and reflect on how to preserve integrity and act in morally responsible ways while engaging in the use of Christian virtue ethics as a mechanism. For example, spiritual mentors who challenge athletes to reflect on their own faith and values can also provide support during these ethical dilemmas. St. Thomas' virtue of Fortitude could also be introduced in the discussion, highlighting the importance of standing firm amidst temptations and moral dilemmas that the athletes might face. Four real-life scenarios are presented, and the small groups then discuss ways to integrate good Christian values, such as integrity, humility, and service, into their decision-making.

Suggested Activities

1. Discussion on Real-life Scenarios: Athletes will engage in group discussions about real-world ethical dilemmas faced in the realm of sports (e.g., doping, game-fixing, faking an injury, and many more). Each group will discuss how virtues such as integrity, humility, and honesty can lead to a better outcome in their decision-making.
2. Role-Playing on Ethical Scenarios: Athletes will participate in role-playing exercises, acting out scenarios they must make ethical decisions in high-pressure situations. Afterward, a group will reflect on the role of their faith in their choices and how Christian ethics help them navigate through these challenges.
3. Personal Virtue Reflection: Athletes are requested to write their own personal ethical dilemmas and ask themselves how their faith can possibly guide them in their response. They will reflect on how virtues like courage, patience, and honesty can be applied to real-life situations.

Session 6: Spiritual Reflection and Goal Setting

The last session will be all about reflecting, setting goals, and weaving all the things the athletes learned and reflected. Athletes will attend a spiritual retreat or reflection day, during which they will evaluate their spiritual, mental, and physical growth. Through theological reflection, the athletes set both personal and athletic goals that are consistent with their faith. Spiritual reflection is recognized as an essential component in ensuring long-term happiness and connection with the purposeful aspects of life while pursuing growth at both personal and professional levels (Koenig, 2009). The session concludes with hands-on exercises that help integrate spiritual, mental, and physical objectives.

Suggested Activities

1. Spiritual Retreat or Reflection Day: The final session will be held as a spiritual retreat or a day of quiet reflection, where the athlete focuses on assessing their growth over the past sessions. This retreat may include guided meditation, scripture reading, and periods of personal reflection.
2. Goal-Setting Workshop: Athletes will work on setting both spiritual and athletic goals for the upcoming season, aligning them with faith-based principles. The goals will reflect not only athletic aspirations but also personal spiritual growth, such as committing to regular prayer or ethical decision-making.
3. Group Prayer and Commissioning: The session will conclude with a group prayer, where athletes are encouraged to pray for each other's goals and aspirations. Coaches, chaplains, and peers will lay hands on the athletes as a symbolic act of commissioning them for the challenges ahead, affirming their commitment to live out their faith in both personal and professional contexts.

Evaluation and Feedback Mechanism

The module will be continuously assessed to make sure of its effectiveness. Regular surveys will also be conducted with each athlete to assess their spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being. It will also include one-to-one Mentorship sessions that give an individual spiritual guidance and support. Assessment instruments provide systematic and structured methods to more accurately appraise the effect of spiritual practice on athlete wellness. Similarly, peer feedback will enable athletes to reflect personally on how completing the module has impacted their athletic and holistic development. This module will also be revised and updated periodically to ensure it remains current with the evolving needs of athletes. It is a very fluid process, heavily informed by feedback from student-athletes, which enables the curriculum to be continuously updated and most useful in addressing the spiritual, mental, and physical challenges they face.

Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Although advantageous, incorporating spiritual care into an athlete's holistic health continuum presents significant challenges and raises important ethical considerations. This must be tactfully maneuvered in order to deliver spiritual care inclusively, respectfully, and effectively – particularly within the diverse and secular context of top-level sports. The bulk of this section will examine the central dilemmas, namely religious pluralism and potential tensions between secular perspectives and faith-informed paradigms, as well as exploring a middle way in the context of religion.

Religious Diversity and the Challenge of Creating Inclusive Spiritual Spaces

The religious pluralism found within sports teams is a primary complication when attempting to adopt such a spiritual care model. There is a wide array of religious backgrounds from which athletes come, as well as some who are not members of any particular tradition. It is essential to make spiritual care inclusive and honour the beliefs or non-beliefs of everyone working on your team so as not to deter individuals nor push religion onto anyone. Healthcare workers and sports trainers should recognize the various spiritual demands as they strive not to coerce athletes into participating in certain religious activities (McKnight, 2009). Like other psychosocial concepts (despair and sadness), the spiritual care model should be based on universal human spirituality, such as hope, persistence, and resilience, which can be translated into every personal belief to facilitate broader application. Coaching and mentoring must be careful in honoring faith-based conversations or practices as optional, avoiding mandatory requirements that would include any derogatory label containing the word 'none' toward others.

Sports professionals working with teams should consider spiritual care that avoids drifting into denominational or sectarian language, given the presence of multiple faiths among athletes. Non-religious mindfulness practice and personalized

spiritual guidance that respects diverse beliefs provide teams with a safe space to reflect. Furthermore, sports programs should ensure that players have options for opting out of religious activities without fear of being ostracized. A team discussion about hope or perseverance, for instance, can be structured in a way that allows athletes from different faith traditions (or no tradition) to join meaningfully.

Balancing Secular and Faith-based Approaches in Sports Psychology

Another challenge in spiritual integration for athletes is reconciling secular sports psychology practices with faith-based initiatives. As much as athletes may credit their faith for giving them strength and meaning, programs must be diligent in ensuring that spiritual practices do not interfere with accepted psychological work or professional standards. Secular Sports Psychology: evidence-based approaches related to mental toughness, performance anxiety, and cognitive-behavioral methods. These are based on long-standing scientific principles, and adding a spiritual dimension to the mix can often resolve concerns about whether care is any less objective or effective.

As Röthlin et al. (2023) echo, faith-based techniques can enhance post-secular sports psychology by connecting existential matters that often carry considerable weight in aspirational competitive environments. Inhalation is a faith-based practice, similar to prayer or meditation, and can often complement secular mindfulness techniques, helping athletes calm themselves, which in turn affects the performance they deliver (Röthlin et al., 2023). Nevertheless, coaches and sports psychologists should carefully consider when spiritual support is essential in mental health work. Another important ethical consideration here is that practices based on faith do not overshadow evidence-based psychological care. Spiritual care is identified by McKnight (2009) as one of the optional, additional support tools for athlete mental health and well-being that can be incorporated or utilized. While utilizing these very same resources will increase mental toughness in prayerful athletes, they should also have access to counseling or cognitive behavioral therapy for more serious issues of mental health.

While the inclusion of spirituality in athlete care is highly advantageous, it also presents special challenges that must be handled carefully and with a strong sense of ethics. At another level, navigating religious diversity, reconciling secular and faith-based approaches to moral education, managing the ethical use of spiritual power in personality development, and fostering genuine spiritual growth. The creation of explicit guidelines and an attitude that is respectful toward all religions can provide spiritual care, rather than disrupting the overall well-being of athletes in sports programs.

Conclusion

The integration of spirituality into athlete care is an essential and often overlooked component of holistic well-being. This paper presents a convincing argument that incorporating spiritual practices enhances our understanding of athlete

health, extending beyond conventional physical and psychological approaches. A theological framework aligns spiritual virtues, such as hope, resilience, and perseverance, with athletic goals that culminate in a mindset of long-term stability amidst adversity and challenges. Spirituality should not be viewed as a supplement in athlete care but rather as an indispensable part of holistic well-being. This equips athletes with the spiritual tools to handle both individual and professional struggles, guiding them toward becoming resilient and purposeful individuals. This paper accordingly shows how a theologically informed model of athlete care could revolutionize sports and act as a catalyst that enables this sports landscape to grow beyond its collective human potential. Sitting at the intersection of theology, sports science, and psychology, endeavors to advance the conversation around this subject. Athletes have the potential to experience physical success enhanced by more genuine fulfillment and a sense of purpose in their lives by dedicating themselves to spiritual practice. Future research should empirically assess the effectiveness of the proposed spiritual module, comparing it with secular approaches to further validate the unique contributions of theological perspectives in athlete care.

References

- [1] Adogame, Afe, Nick J. (2020). Watson, and Andrew Parker. *Global Perspectives on Sports and Christianity*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- [2] Alpert, Rebecca T. (2015). *Religion and sports: An introduction and case studies*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- [3] Austin, SJ, Nicholas. (2018). *Aquinas on virtue: A causal reading*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- [4] Baker, William J. (2016). *Of gods and games: Religious faith and modern sports*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- [5] Bochanski, Philip. (2019). *The virtue of hope: How confidence in god can lead you to heaven*. Ashland: TAN Books.
- [6] Cornelio, Jayeel Serrano. (2016). *Routledge Religion in Contemporary Asia Series: Being Catholic in the Contemporary Philippines: Young people reinterpreting religion*. Taylor and Francis.
- [7] Cynarski, Wojciech J., Stanisław Dyndał, Jacek Wąsik, Dariusz Mosler, Iulia Pavlova, Jong-Hoon Yu, Tadeusz Ambroży, Łukasz Rydzik, and Krzysztof Kasicki. *The relationship of the religious faith and practice of student youth and adults in southeastern Poland and western Ukraine with their health status and attitudes toward physical culture*, January 8, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-3834628/v1>.
- [8] Doorley, James D., Todd B. Kashdan, Caroline H. Weppner, and Carol R. Glass. "The Effects of Self-Compassion on Daily Emotion Regulation and Performance Rebound among College Athletes: Comparisons with

- Confidence, Grit, and Hope." *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 58 (January, 2022): 102081. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2021.102081>.
- [9] Elliott, J. (2005). *Interdisciplinary perspectives on hope*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- [10] "Giving the Best of Yourself: A document on the Christian perspective on sport and the human person, from the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life. Accessed September 11, 2024. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/06/01/180601b.html>.
- [11] Halstead, Philip, John Tucker, Robert Ellis, Stephen Garner, Myk Habets, Sarah Harris, Peter Lineham, Simon Moetara, and B. (2021). Grant Stewart. *Sports and play in Christian theology*. Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic.
- [12] Hoffman, Shirl James. (2020). *Good game: Christianity and the culture of sports*. S.I.: BAYLOR UNIVERSITY PRESS.
- [13] Howell, Brian M. (2008). *Christianity in the local context: Southern Baptists in the Philippines*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [14] Kelly, Patrick M. (2015). *Youth Sport and spirituality: Catholic perspectives*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- [15] Koenig, Harold G. "Research on Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health: A Review." *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 54, no. 5 (May, 2009): 283–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/070674370905400502>.
- [16] Koenig, Harold G., John R. (2024). Peteet, and Tyler J. VanderWeele. *Handbook of Religion and Health*. New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press.
- [17] Lu, Frank J., and Yawen Hsu. "Injured Athletes' Rehabilitation Beliefs and Subjective Well-Being: The Contribution of Hope and Social Support." *Journal of Athletic Training* 48, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 92–98. <https://doi.org/10.4085/1062-6050-48.1.03>.
- [18] Mark Stephen , Nesti. "Persons First, Athletes Second." *Journal of Religion & Society, Supplemental* , 2019. <https://doi.org/https://cdr.creighton.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/9cdf9a7c-0309-487b-ae68-4cc45fa0b09d/content>.
- [19] McKnight, Cynthia M. "Spiritual Disciplines in Sports Medicine: A Review of the Literature." *Athletic Training & Sports Health Care* 1, no. 6 (November, 2009): 279–85. <https://doi.org/10.3928/19425864-20091019-05>.
- [20] McKnight, Scot. (2010). *Fasting: The ancient practices*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- [21] Murphy, Elijah R. "Hope and Well-Being." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 50 (April, 2023): 101558. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsy.2023.101558>.

- [22] Nesti, Mark. "Sporting Recommendations for Spiritual Encounters: Delivering Sport Psychology inside the English Premier League." *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research* 52, no. 1 (October 1, 2011): 14–21. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10141-011-0010-z>.
- [23] Noh, Young-Eun, and Syazana Shahdan. "A Systematic Review of Religion/Spirituality and Sport: A Psychological Perspective." *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 46 (January, 2020): 101603. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2019.101603>.
- [24] Pisk, Jernej. "Faith, Hope and Love in Sport." *AUC KINANTHROPOLOGICA* 53, no. 2 (November 30, 2017): 146–58. <https://doi.org/10.14712/23366052.2017.12>.
- [25] Rolo, Cristina Maria Roque da Costa. An intervention for fostering hope, athletic and academic performance in university student-athletes, 2004.
- [26] Rolo, Cristina, and Daniel Gould. "An Intervention for Fostering Hope, Athletic and Academic Performance in University Student-Athletes." *International Coaching Psychology Review* 2, no. 1 (March, 2007): 44–61. <https://doi.org/10.53841/bpsicpr.2007.2.1.44>.
- [27] Röthlin, Philipp, Shaunna Taylor, Anders Håkansson, and Malte Christian Claussen. "Sports Psychology and Sports Psychiatry Together for Athletes' Mental Health." *Sports Psychiatry* 2, no. 4 (November 1, 2023): 119–20. <https://doi.org/10.1024/2674-0052/a000062>.
- [28] Snow, Nancy E., and Lewis R. (2024). Gordon. *The virtue of hope*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- [29] Stevenson, Christopher L. "The Christian-Athlete: An Interactionist-Developmental Analysis." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 8, no. 4 (December, 1991): 362–79. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.8.4.362>.
- [30] Tejero-González, Carlos Ma. "Participating in Sports and Practicing a Religion Are Related to Levels of Happiness." *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research* 88, no. 1 (November 5, 2020): 11–17. <https://doi.org/10.2478/pccsr-2020-0021>.
- [31] Thomas, Saint Aquinas. (2016). *Summa theologica: II-II*. Dinslaken: Anboco.
- [32] Trothen, Tracy J. (2018). "Spirituality, Sport, and Doping: MORE THAN JUST A Game." *SpringerBriefs in Religious Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02997-5>.
- [33] Trothen, Tracy. "Sport, Spirituality, and Religion: New Intersections." *Religions* 10, no. 10 (September 23, 2019): 545. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10100545>.
- [34] Twietmeyer, Gregg. "Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports." *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (February, 2012): 94–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2011.652663>.

- [35] Wang, Liang. "Factors Influencing Athlete Engagement in High-Level Athletes: A Systematic Review." *International Journal of Scientific and Management Research* 06, no. 12 (2023): 32–44. <https://doi.org/10.37502/ijsmr.2023.61203>.
- [36] Wiese-Bjornstal, Diane M., Kristin N. Wood, Francesca M. Principe, and Emma S. Schwartz. "Religiosity and Ways of Coping with Sport Injuries among Christian Athletes." *Journal of the Christian Society for Kinesiology, Leisure and Sport Studies*. 7, no. 1 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.7290/jcskls07x0hj>.